

# Put Food in the Budget

*Promote health and fight poverty*

Nutritious food is essential for good health. As part of our belief that fighting poverty is the best medicine money can buy, the 25in5 Network for Poverty Reduction, in partnership with the Association of Local Public Health Agencies, is launching an Ontario-wide campaign for a **Healthy Food Supplement**.

We are calling for the immediate introduction of a \$100 monthly supplement to the basic needs allowance for all adults receiving social assistance. The existence of widespread food insecurity and chronic illness related to poor nutrition is the result of our society's collective negligence and a failure of public policy.

For the last ten years the Ontario Government has mandated the province's 36 local health units to collect and report the annual cost of a Nutritious Food Basket in their areas. These reports consistently show a vast gap between the level of benefits received by people on social assistance and their ability to meet their basic food requirements along with other necessities of life.

There is no current formula for establishing social assistance benefit levels and the basic needs allowance is set far below actual market costs. We are pleased the government has created its Social Assistance Review to evaluate the true cost of living in communities across Ontario and we look forward to a new benchmark for income adequacy in setting benefit rates. This is a hopeful development. And hope matters.

In the meantime, it is critical to the health and wellbeing of social assistance recipients that the government takes a first step toward income adequacy by introducing a **\$100 per month Healthy Food Supplement**. The Supplement will serve as a down payment in closing the monthly gap of food deficiency while reducing the negative health effects of poverty.

It will also stimulate spending in our local economies. As a recent Globe and Mail editorial says, the idea of putting money in the hands of low-income people who will spend it in their communities "is an idea with remarkably wide consensus... **In these times, putting money in the hands of those who need it is good policy.**"

Put food in the budget. Promote health and fight poverty.

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## ***Questions and answers on Put Food in the Budget Campaign***

### **Q. Is it realistic to expect the government to act in the upcoming budget?**

A. The budget will be presented on March 26<sup>th</sup>. There is lots of time for the Premier and the Finance Minister to get the message that now is precisely the time to make a down payment on reducing poverty by introducing a Healthy Food Supplement. The Premier has made a promise to reduce poverty – the 2009 budget is the first real test of whether he intends to keep this promise.

### **Q. Why now? Isn't this a bad time to spend more on social assistance?**

A. It is long past the time to address the poverty experienced by people who live on social assistance. Benefit rates are worth 60% what they were 15 years ago. As more people lose their jobs, the costs of poverty will become greater. Investing in a Healthy Food Supplement will be paid back to the provincial treasury as spending in local economies is stimulated across Ontario.

### **Q. How do you guarantee the money will be spent on healthy food?**

A. You trust people to know their own needs and to take care of themselves as best they can in difficult circumstances. There are people at all income levels who make poor choices when it comes to healthy eating. The cost of eating fresh fruit and vegetables makes it a luxury for people on social assistance. They should be entitled to the dignity of a healthy diet.

### **Q. Will there be public support for this initiative?**

A. Canadians believe in a just society where human rights are respected and everyone has equitable access to opportunity. In Ontario, the Premier aspires to a society where “Everyone is at their best.” The public will support a government that keeps its promises and delivers on fairness and justice.

### **Q. Why are Medical Officers of Health advocating on this?**

A. The government requires all public health units to collect annual information on the cost of nutritious food in their local areas. The gap between what it costs to eat a healthy diet and the income received by people who live on social assistance is unacceptably wide and is getting wider. Medical Officers of Health are providing advice to the government on closing the gap on health inequalities.

### **Q. What are some of the health impacts?**

A. People who experience chronic food insecurity and a lack of access to a healthy diet suffer from numerous negative effects on their health, including higher risk of chronic illness, depression, heart disease, diabetes, and blood pressure. Fighting poverty is the best medicine money can buy.

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